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AUTHOR	Muchnik, Melvyn M.
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ABSTRACT

The role of the media ecologist is to interpret the effect of electric technology upon mankind and to ask long-range questions about the communication explosion. At present, great gaps exist between technology and man's ability to grasp it. Communication media not only act as channels of communication, but also have become an integral part of the communication's interpretation; consequently, the media as well as the message has been rejected as biased by such minority groups as black Americans. Educational institutions and English teachers too often resist any consideration of a new visual or electric literacy. For example, critics of television fail to appreciate it as a new technology which demands different sensory responses. The media ecologist must present the new technology as the status quo which has to be understood if it is to be fully utilized. (JM)

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Mr. Muchnik is an Assistant Professor of Mass Communication at The University of Denver

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THE MEDIA ECOLOGIST: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Melvyn M. Muchnik

> As a piece of technology, the clock is a machine that produces uniform seconds, minutes, and hours on an assembly-line pattern. Processed in this uniform way, time is separated from the rhythms of human experience . . . Our new electric technology is organic and non-mechanical in tendency because it extends, not our eyes, but our central nervous system as a planetary vesture. In the space-time world of electric technology the older mechanical time begins to feel unacceptable, if only because it is uniform.[1]

The time and pace of the twentieth century, the only century in the history of the world that has produced two distinct ages, the atomic age superceded quickly by the electric or computer age, has produced a hybrid individual who at least one noted language specialist calls a **media ecologist.** Neil Postman of New York University has defined the **media ecologist** as one who asks the question, "What is happening to people as a result of the new technology?"

The media ecologist articulates what the rest of us feel and do as a result of being plugged in to an electric world. While the social scientist often feels the responsibility to validate theories by creating and utilizing methodologies to produce substantiating experimental and empirical evidence, the media ecologist feels no such responsibility. His mission is to ask the visionary massive questions, often without the slightest notion of methodology.

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"What are the long range effects of the communications explosion?" "What effects are electric media having on youth?" "Who is going to program computers?" "Are schools obsolete?" "What uses should we make of bugging devices?" "Do we need a concept of privacy?" "Have big media repealed the Bill of Rights?"

The Wharf-Sapir notion of language and culture has been extended to a concept of media as a language and a partial determinant of twentieth century culture. Simplistic communications models only begin to reveal the complexity of the electic age.

[1]Marshall McLuhan, **Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,** (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), pp. 146-47.

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Elihu Katz's "two-stepflow" hypothesis of communication, advanced in 1957, involving a message conveyed though the media to someone of personal influence, an opinion leader, and thence to the masses would seem in need of reassessment.[2]

The Harold Lasswell basic model of "Who, Says What, in Which Channel, to Whom, With What Effect" initially used to explain the process of communication in society and applied to mass media would seem to explain an infinitesimally small portion of a process involving thousands of simultaneous messages directed toward a generally undefined audience of thousands or millions of people.[3]

At the end of the nineteenth century, the noted British author John Ruskin, upon being informed that a telephone cable had been laid between India and Great Britain responded by saying, "What have we to say to India?" Indeed it would appear that one of the major problems in the design of a global communications satellite system is a throwback to Ruskin's question, "What have we to say to the rest of the world?"

On many fronts, whether it be communications satellites, computers, nuclear armament, contraceptive pills, or heart transplants, technology has seemed to outstrip society's ability to keep pace. The media ecologist, a product of these technological developments, perceives the sometimes frightening gaps between technology and man's ability to use it meaningfully. He asks the probing questions that are meant as sensitizing agents of rational contemplation of the world as it exists **now,** not as it existed yesterday in the pre-electric age. And despite Ashley Montagu's assertion that the ". . . ship is sunk and the goose is cooked," the media ecologist as a visionary sees what might be and claims, "There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to think."[4]

The underlying implication of this for the media ecologist, and perhaps his raison d'etre, is that man is not yet demonstrating his ability to think rationally and thus has not yet come to grips with the electric age. In writing about the efficiency of communications Lasswell noted, "In human societies, the process is efficient to the degree that rational judgments are facilitated . . . One task of a rationally organized society is to discover and control any factors that interfere with efficient communication."[5]

It is becoming apparent only now that man is discovering the frequent inefficiency of his communication. Equally apparent

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[2]Elihu Datz, "The Two-Stepflow Theory of Communication," **Mass Communications,** Wilbur Schramm, (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1960), pp. 346-365.

[3]Harold D. Lasswell, "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society," **Mass Communications,** pp. 117-130.

[4]Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, **The Medium is the Massage,** (New York: Bantam Books, 1967) p. 25.

[5]Harold Lasswell, **op. cit.,** p. 125.

for the media ecologist is the concept that media not only act as hollow channels for communications, but are an integral part of the interpretation of those communications. The plight of the ghetto Negro offers an illustration:

> The average black person couldn't give less of a damn about what the media say. The intelligent black person is resentful of what he considers to be a totally false portrayal of what goes on in the ghetto. Most black people see the newspapers as mouthpieces of the "power structure."[6]

The rejection of mass media by the average black American in favor of interpersonal and other sources of information certainly must have some effect on the judgements he must make and his subsequent behavior based on these judgements. In this illustration an individual selectively rejects or perceives information as biased and therefore reinforcing an already existing hostile attitude. It is the medium used to convey messages that to the black man has become part of the message itself.

Similarly, the media ecologist applies a theory that media constantly bombard man's "sensorium" and create the "new" behavior of the electric age and crumble the institutions of the pre-electric age. Religion, education, and the home are anachronistic in the electric age. There is at least as much information and involvement transmitted on television in one evening as there may be within the four-walled classroom which has not changed much since the nineteenth century.

> The youth of today are not permitted to approach the traditional heritage of mankind through the door of technological awareness. The only possible door for them is slammed in their faces by a rear-view-mirror society.
>
> The young today live mythically and in depth, but they encounter instruction in situations organized by classified informations — subjects are unrelated, they are visually conceived in terms of a blueprint. Many of our institutions suppress all the natural experience of youth, who respond with untaught delight to poetry and the beauty of the new technological environment, the environment of popular culture. It could be their door to all past achievement if studied as an active (and not necessarily benign) force.[7]

It is not so surprising that educational institutions have been so resistant to change as to exclude any consideration of a new visual or electric kind of literacy. In the educational institution, electric communication can not be literacy. It may be subsumed as

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[6]**Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,** (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 374.

[7]McLuhan, **op. cit.,** p. 100.

"film appreciation" or fall under some other rubric, but certainly visual forms are not equivocated to "literate" man.

Postman has noted that the phrase "literature of television" is somewhat of an anathema to the English teacher:

> For the teacher who confines literature to written or printed forms (as the word's etymology suggests), television, by definition cannot be properly classified as literature. For the teacher who defines **belles lettres** — the higher arts of literary expression — television is excluded not only by reason of its form but by reason of its unexalted reputation.[8]

Postman goes on to note, that even in the wider definition of literature which includes visual forms, particularly theater, television is not included by most teachers of English because it has not attained the degree of permanence normally associated with literature.[9]

Some "English teachers, a rather compartmentalized and restrictive classification in itself, have taken note of some sort of inroads of electric media into what has been called post literate man. Robert D. Richardson of the University of Denver English Department has written:

> No one really doubts that the film and its audio-visual offspring are near the heart of . . . changes, changes which indicate a widespread and constantly accelerating displacement of verbal literacy by some sort of visual literacy. Such a displacement, if real, has unsettling implications for a society which has been so dependent upon the printed word for its modes of perception, its practical epistemology, and even its values.[10]

Even here Richardson is expressing some incredulity that such a displacement could be real. To the media ecologist, such a displacement is not only real, but causing men to change in a way that is only revolutionary to such as the English teacher who believes that visual forms may warrant, just possibly, further study not quite on par with traditional printed media.

> The main cause for disappointment in and for criticism of television is the failure on the part of its critics to view it as a totally new technology which demands

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[8]Neil Postman, "The Literature of Television," **Mass Media and Communication,** Charles S. Steinberg (ed.), (New York: Hastings House, 1966), p. 257.

[9]**Ibid.**

[10]Robert D. Richardson, Jr., "Visual Literacy: Literature and the Film," **Denver Quarterly,** Vol I (Summer, 1966), p. 24.

> different sensory responses. These critics insist on regarding television as merely a degraded form of print technology.[11]

Richardson too noted the uncomfortable situation created by television commercials, superior technically and aesthetically when compared to the frequently ". . . sorry trash they interrupt."[12] It is the television commercial that has attempted to create new sensory experiences. The almost subliminal quick changes of scenes to create a sensory montage that goes beyond the mere portrayal of printed material is a creation of television advertising. The no-story line commercial considered to be a more involving experience is a form of communication that appears to pay dividends to advertising agencies and their clients. It is a form of communication that electric age youth appear to understand without the alarm that it may be better and more effective than more traditional pre-electric forms of communication.

It is difficult to determine just how one could conceivably understand what is happening to the young as a result of the new technology if one denies its influence on the basis of some sort of comparative analysis to traditional and perhaps outmoded technology. To the media ecologist it is the new technology that is the status quo and it is this status quo that we have not yet begun to study. To one who is resistant to change, the notion that even change has changed is incomprehensible.

While Marshall McLuhan is cited by Postman as the most publicized of media ecologists, his list of those few men who have a comprehension of what is happening is an all-at-once world of unclassified information includes such diversified individuals as Alfred North Whitehead, Buckminster Fuller, Peter Drucker, Kenneth Boulding, Harold Lasswell, Don Fabun and Ray Bradbury. These are the men who ask to see the world as it is and may dream beyond, while others uncomprehending retreat into the security of the world that was.

Edward Kennedy in a eulogy to his brother Robert cited an unattributed quote favored by his late brother. "Some men see things as they are and say why. I see things that never were and say why not." The media ecologist sees the electric aged world as it is and asks the question, "What might it be if we begin to study it and understand it?"

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[11]Marshall McLuhan, **op. cit.**, p. 128.
[12]Robert D. Richardson, Jr., **op. cit.**, p. 25.

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